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SIPDIS

BANGKOK FOR HOWELL HOWARD AND WINSTON BOWMAN
STATE PASS USAID
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TAGS: [KFLU](#) [TBIO](#) [SENV](#) [KSCA](#) [AMGT](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: PHILIPPINES' INITIAL RESPONSE TO SWINE FLU THREAT

¶1. (SBU) Summary: While no swine flu cases have been reported in the Philippines, the government is taking steps to increase protective measures and raise its alert level for possible outbreaks. On April 28, the Secretary of National Defense told the Ambassador the government viewed the situation with "utmost seriousness" and was taking a range of protective measures. He welcomed Ambassador's offer to provide the latest public health and public affairs information available to Post. Philippine health authorities do not currently intend to issue any travel bans, but said they plan to institute thermal screening of arriving air passengers and have designated possible quarantine hospitals in case flu victims are identified. The Embassy held an emergency preparedness meeting to ensure close coordination among Mission elements and with U.S. military forces currently in country, and distributed information to staff and posted links on its website for U.S. citizens. The Philippine Department of Agriculture is preparing to ban U.S. pork in spite of U.S. Department of Agriculture proof that eating pork does not cause the flu. END SUMMARY.

GOVERNMENT RAMPING UP EFFORTS

¶2. (SBU) While taking part April 28 in events in the Bicol region associated with this year's Balikatan bilateral military exercise, the Ambassador and Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro discussed the swine flu outbreak and both governments' initial steps to deal with the problem. Teodoro, who chairs the government's National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC), told the Ambassador that although there were no reported swine flu cases in the Philippines, the government was taking recent outbreaks of flu in Mexico and elsewhere with utmost seriousness and implementing a range of protective measures. He said he would be returning to Manila to chair an emergency meeting of the NDCC and report to the Cabinet and President on the results of his coordination efforts.

¶3. (SBU) The Ambassador briefed Secretary Teodoro on U.S. mitigation and control efforts, and the Secretary welcomed the Ambassador's offer to provide the most recent public health and public affairs information and fact sheets available to the Mission to assist the NDCC with its planning. Mission has passed that information along to the NDCC and Teodoro's personal staff.

POST PREPAREDNESS

¶4. (SBU) A/DCM convened a meeting April 28 of key Mission elements involved in health issues, public affairs, American citizen outreach, and agricultural issues to ensure Mission's internal preparedness for any potential outbreak of influenza and to evaluate the Philippines' initial response to the swine flu outbreak.

¶5. (SBU) USAID health officers reported on their discussions with the Philippine Department of Health, and Manila-based officials of

the World Health Organization and U.S. Centers for Disease Control. The Department of Health issued prevention measures, and set up reporting protocols and telephone hotlines. The Philippine government does not have a travel ban in place, but is collecting health declaration cards from travelers. Officials said they plan to use thermal scans on passengers arriving from affected countries, but no such measures were yet evident at Manila's international airport. Three Manila hospitals with isolation rooms have been designated as treatment centers in case of an outbreak.

POST PREPAREDNESS

¶16. (SBU) Post's medical unit reported that adequate stocks of Tamiflu and Relanza are on hand for Mission personnel and family members and local staff if an outbreak were to occur. The medical unit has reviewed treatment plans and protocols for the Mission, and ensured that flu testing kits are available. Mission Peace Corps personnel reported that all Volunteers in the Philippines have Tamiflu medication in their emergency medical kits in case of any outbreaks here. Mission's regional medical officer will maintain close contact with U.S. military medical officers serving the members of Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines in the southern Philippines, as well as some 6,000 U.S. military personnel taking part in the Balikatan military exercise to ensure they are fully informed of the USG response to the swine flu outbreak.

PUBLIC INFORMATION OUTREACH

¶17. (SBU) Post disseminated flu facts and prevention information to Mission members, and asked all members to report to the Health Unit

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if they exhibit flu symptoms. The American Citizen Services section has also posted information and links on the Embassy website for resident and visiting American citizens.

POSSIBLE BAN ON U.S. PORK

¶18. (SBU) The Philippines' Secretary of Agriculture announced on April 26 he would issue an order to ban all imports of U.S. pork and pork products because of a purported swine flu threat. Post stressed to Philippine agriculture and health officials that properly handled and cooked pork products would not transmit swine flu, and the Philippine Bureau of Animal Industry acknowledged this fact. Still, political and public relations considerations may outweigh scientific fact on this issue.

NEXT STEPS

¶19. (SBU) Post's interagency pandemic preparedness task force will meet on April 29 to further assess how protocols and plans developed for possible avian influenza outbreaks could be employed in the current situation.

KENNEY